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Excavation on Roundway Down

by Sarah Semple¹ and Howard Williams²

In 1840 a barrow on Roundway Down was opened revealing a female inhumation in an iron bound coffin or chest, accompanied by a cabochon garnet and gold necklace, a composite gold pin-suite and a wooden bucket with bronze mounts (Hughes 1843, 12f; Jackson 1851, 176-7; Merewether 1851, 47-8; Akerman 1855, 1-2; Robinson 1977/8, 191-5). The Roundway burial is representative of a distinct group of high-status female barrow burials, ascribed a late 7th century context based on the stylistic dates given to the surviving artefactual assemblages from the Roundway burial and the remarkable female inhumation from Swallowcliffe Down (Meaney and Hawkes 1970, 47-9; Speake 1989).

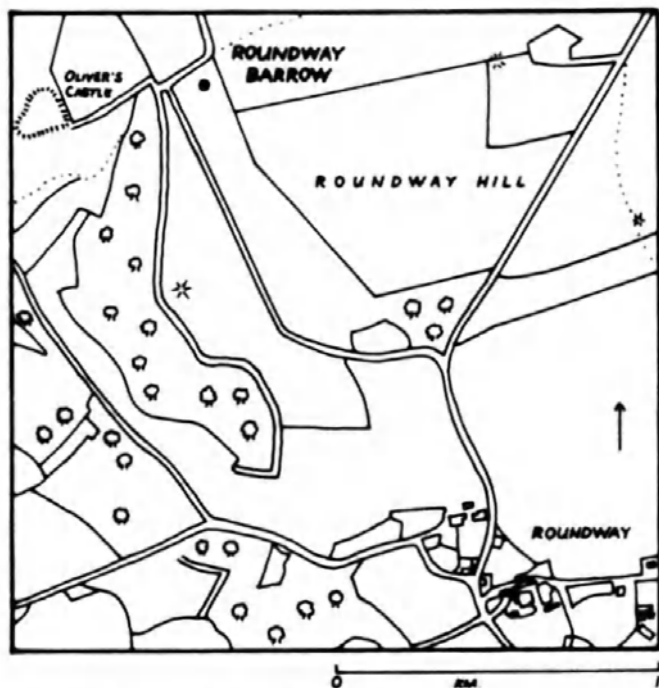


Fig. 1. Location of Roundway Down barrow opened in 1840

The Roundway Project was developed as a means of drawing together all known evidence regarding the Anglo-Saxon burial and its location. In September 2000 a programme of geophysical survey and excavation was directed by the authors in the presumed area of the barrow opened in 1840 by Lord Colston and Stoughton Money. The relocation and re-excavation of the site was seen as a vital component in a reconsideration of the chronology and social

significance of the phenomenon of female high status barrow burial.

The project succeeded in locating the site and thus returning the nationally significant grave assemblage to its original funerary and landscape context. Furthermore, the project may have reunited the remarkable grave assemblage (housed at Devizes Museum) with the skeletal remains they once accompanied.

A full publication of the results including a detailed phasing, the result of radiocarbon analysis and specialist reports is currently in progress. This purpose of this note is to draw attention to the recent work and briefly outline the results of the survey and excavation.

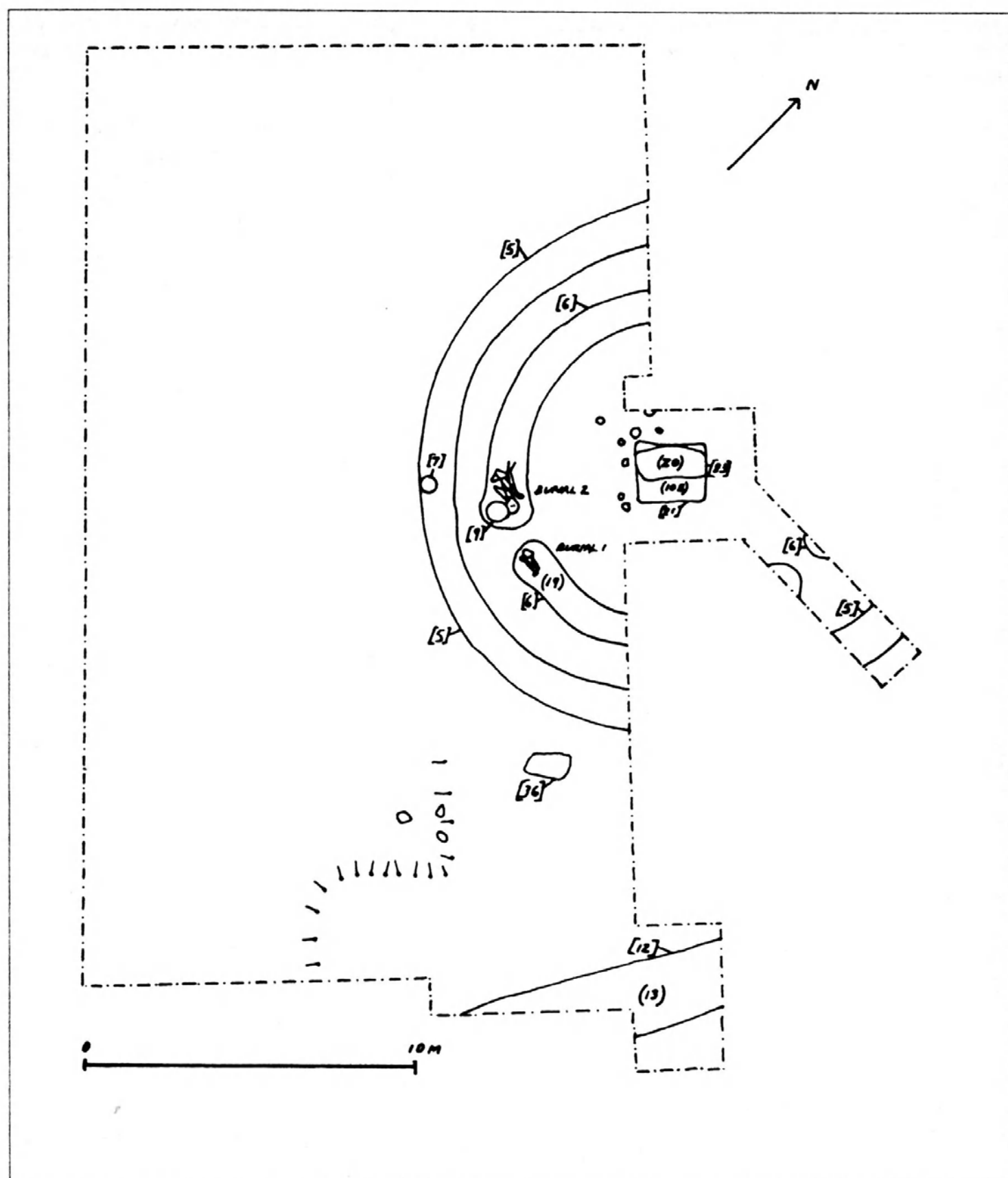
LOCATION

The location of the barrow opened in 1840 was suggested by Leslie Grinsell as the denuded mound marked on the OS 1:25,000 (SU 0059 6476). This identification was later confirmed by Robinson in his detailed account of the Roundway burial and assemblage (1977/8, 193). Aerial photographs of the area show an upstanding barrow during the 1940s and the National Monument Record in 1960 describe a heavily plough damaged barrow 0.40m high with quantities of Bronze Age pottery eroding from the eastern side. The tumulus is marked on the most recent edition of the 1:25,000 OS, but can no longer be distinguished in the field. The barrow occupied a high position on the chalk downland (205m OD) 500m WSW of the hillfort of Oliver's Castle and 1.7km NW of the village of Roundway (Figure 1).

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Geophysical survey was undertaken on behalf of the project by Dr. Mike Hamilton (University of Wales, Newport). A gradiometer survey was undertaken over a 100m sq. area and a resistivity survey used provide

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a more detailed image of the barrow over a 40 m sq. area. This revealed a double ring-ditched round barrow with a maximum diameter of 14m and a central negative feature approximately 2 x 2m square. A 100m sq. area was field-walked on a 20m sq. grid

and a 40m sq. area encompassing the full monument was metal-detected in advance of machine excavation. Fieldwalking identified a concentration of prehistoric pottery and flint, and Roman material was also present. A sample 2m sq. test pit demonstrated plough

damage to the depth of the natural chalk. Subsequently, a 20 x 30m area was machine stripped revealing the western half of the monument (Figure 2). The trench was then extended by hand over the central feature, and a 6 x 1.5m slot dug to sample the ring-ditches in the south-eastern portion of the monument and to investigate an anomaly noted on the gradiometer survey. A 2 x 4m area was opened at the eastern corner of the trench to expose a portion of the linear feature identified on both the gradiometer and resistivity surveys.

The excavations demonstrated a complex sequence of events between the early Bronze Age and the Early Medieval period. Initial analysis indicates the primary monument comprised a segmented ring-ditch [6] with a minimum of two causeways, c. 8m in diameter, encompassing a mound raised over a central grave. It has not as yet been established whether the square burial chamber ([21] c. 2 x 2 x 2m) represents the original Bronze-Age chamber or an enlargement in the Early Medieval period. It can however be argued that a central burial of Bronze Age date was removed or destroyed in the Early Medieval period. The chamber backfill included Bronze Age pottery, cremated bone and a polished flint disc, material suggestive of a primary central burial, possibly of Beaker date. Contemporary with the creation of the monument and central burial, an adult (burial 2) was placed in a crouched position on the chalk floor of the north-west terminal of the inner ditch [6] and covered with chalk (62). A series of tiny shale beads were found in the neck and wrist region of burial 2.

The stratigraphic sequence indicates that a second outer ditch [5] was constructed at a later stage after considerable erosion and filling of the inner ring-ditch. A crouched juvenile burial (burial 1) was recovered from the upper fill (19) of the south-west terminal of the inner ring-ditch [6]. The burial was made after a considerable length of time had elapsed since the construction of the primary monument but subsequent to the cutting of the outer ditch. The skeleton was tightly flexed and placed on its back.

Two secondary cremations were located to the west of the monument. Cremation 1 [7] was inserted into the outer ditch and was heavily truncated by ploughing. Cremation 2 [9] was inserted into the north-west terminal of the inner ditch. Both cremations were unurned and unaccompanied by artefacts. These may be contemporary with [36] a sub-rectangular pit immediately outside the outer ring-ditch to the south-west. The pit was filled with a mass of cremated remains, including animal and human bone and three large portions of charcoal. The feature was capped with a

layer of tightly packed burned chalk (37). This feature may represent the sweepings from a cremation pyre, or perhaps several cremation events, deliberately buried as part of the post-cremation rites.

During the Early Medieval period, the barrow was used again. A considerable portion of the mound was opened revealing the central prehistoric grave. At this point the chamber [21] was either constructed, destroying a Bronze Age central burial, or was discovered and entirely emptied and the female high-status burial inserted (oriented east-west). In either case, some attention was clearly paid to the position of the earlier grave. The contents of the prehistoric burial were removed and at least partially broken up, a residue thrown in with the grave backfill. This practice of re-using not only a mound, but also burial chambers finds a close comparison with the Swallowcliffe Down female secondary barrow burial, of 7th-century date (Speake 1989). Although an extensive area to the west of the barrow was stripped, there was no indication of further Early Medieval graves in the environs, suggesting the barrow may have been re-used exclusively by this single, central grave, rather than acting as a focus for a communal cemetery.

Excavation of the central chamber indicated the grave had been broken open twice in recent times. The first was the documented excavation in 1840 [108]. Subsequently, an undocumented intrusion had halted abruptly when it was clear the chamber had already been emptied [83]. A collection of disarticulated human bone, including parts of a pelvis and skull, upper and lower arm bones, upper and lower leg bones, vertebrae and collarbone, were recovered from the 1840 backfill (82, 99) and from the later disturbance (20). These may represent the primary burial (Bronze Age), the secondary (Early Medieval) burial, or a combination of both. AMS dates are currently awaited. A small portion of the Early Medieval grave fill survived (100) from which small fragments of human bone and pottery were recovered through sieving.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The Roundway female burial is a site of national significance. It represents one of a distinct group of high-status female barrow burials dated to the late 7th century, based largely on the stylistic attributes of the artefactual assemblage (Meaney and Hawkes 1970, 47-9). Other examples from Wiltshire include the Swallowcliffe Down female burial and a number

of burials from Derbyshire, including Galley Low and White Low (Ozanne 1962-6). Accounts of the 19th century investigations at Roundway are fraught with ambiguities and contradictions and until now even the location of the barrow opened in 1840 was uncertain. The project has succeeded in relocating this important site and has returned the grave assemblage to its original funerary and landscape context, demonstrating the Roundway female burial was a secondary burial reusing an ancient monument. The project has also potentially reunited the artefacts with the skeletal remains. Osteological studies will contribute to our understanding of the buried individual and most importantly, the use of the assemblage as an integral component of the argument for presenting a 7th-century date range for female high-status barrow burial can now be tested scientifically. The dating of the recovered bone will have national implications for our understanding of the social and political makeup of the 7th and 8th centuries and for widening our understanding of the symbolic use of ancient monuments for high-status mortuary purposes.

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